



North Korea: Here We Go Again

by Aidan Foster-Carter

Another outbreak of peace in Korea is upon us. The media hailed a few minutes' chat over coffee in Brunei between Colin Powell and North Korean Foreign Minister Paek Nam-sun as a big breakthrough. Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, hotfoot from Pyongyang, says Kim Jong-il is "ready for dialogue without preconditions" with the United States. Pyongyang now "regrets" sinking a South Korean frigate in June; inter-Korean talks have resumed. On-off discussions with Japan are set to restart this month, too.

Forgive me if I'm underwhelmed. Sure, as Winston Churchill said, jaw-jaw is better than war-war - or than no jaw-jaw, come to that. But we have been here before, many a time. Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who said no one steps into the same river twice, never encountered North Korea. And strangely, every time Kim Jong-il dips a toe in the water, some folks cheer as though he'd plunged in and started swimming for real.

Memories are short, and talk is cheap. A Russian, above all, should doubt if the Dear Leader's words are worth the paper they're rarely written on. Recall the kudos Russian President Vladimir Putin gained at the 2000 G8 summit in Tokyo, bearing an offer from Kim Jong-il to freeze North Korea's missiles if someone else would launch his satellites? Egg on face soon followed. At a boozy lunch with South Korean press tycoons, Kim said he'd just been kidding. The Dear Leader should award himself yet another honorific: Big Tease.

Foreign Minister Paek is a teaser too - and a nobody to boot. Like the Cheshire cat in Alice in Wonderland, Paek is just a disembodied smile. Now you see him, now you don't. We had all the same hoopla two years ago when North Korea first joined the ASEAN Regional Forum. Breakthrough! Next year, Paek didn't even show up. Now it's coffee with Colin, but so what? We'll know Pyongyang is serious when they bring on the heavy hitters like Kang Sok-ju, whose nominal rank as Paek's deputy deceives. It was Kang who negotiated the crucial 1994 nuclear Agreed Framework with the U.S.

Again and again we start over with North Korea, without asking what went wrong last time or how come we never get past first base. The big picture, were we only to look, shows Kim Jong-il has learned Lenin's lesson: One step forward, two steps back. "The first step is half the journey" - a Korean proverb much quoted at the June 2000 North-South "breakthrough" summit - needs updating. The second step, if ever, will be key.

The fact is that with all three of its interlocutor foes, North Korea in the past has been far further along than right now - only for ground gained to be later lost. With the U.S., to be fair, it's not all Pyongyang's fault. After 18 months the Bush administration still can't agree on a North Korea policy. Saying you're ready to

talk, and then name-calling - well hello, Mr. "Axis of Evil" - really doesn't add up. Powell of course is for dialogue, but would Donald Rumsfeld have had that coffee? No one says it'll be easy, but this is plain unprofessional. The ABC (Anything But Clinton) principle is a juvenile way to do foreign policy. With a stack of thorny issues - nuclear, missiles, bioweapons: and that's just for starters - requiring urgent attention, getting to the table is way overdue.

Yet to be fair, those in Washington who doubt you can do business with North Korea can cite ample evidence. Take Tokyo, whose de facto contacts with an errant neighbor go back decades. In the 1970s, already, there was talk of formal ties. But the hermit Kingdom retreated into its shell until 1990, when Shin Kanemaru was feted by Kim Il-sung (and given gold that was later part of his downfall.) Two years of talks followed, but broke up over abduction accusations. Fast forward to 2000: more talks, same crux. Will Pyongyang ever admit kidnapping, and let 'em go? Now that would be progress.

But the starkest case of forever going nowhere is with South Korea. Four false dawns, and counting. 1972: A joint declaration, leading to Red Cross talks that fizzled out. 1985: First ever family reunion and economic talks, broken off in 1986. 1991: Major agreements signed, but unimplemented as nuclear worries grew. All this preceded the 2000 summit, which produced grand plans - trans-DMZ road and rail links, above all - only for Pyongyang to back off, using Bush as flimsy excuse. This year alone, North Korea agreed to restart talks in April, cancelled in May, killed five ROK sailors in June, said sorry (sort of) in July, and now in August is talking again. This we should cheer? Once they get 300,000 tons of surplus Southern rice (due to go for animal feed), what betting they find some pretext to pull out again? Such as opposition leader and likely next ROK President Lee Hoi-chang, a tough cookie dubbed a traitor by Pyongyang.

To be clear: I'm not saying the DPRK leopard can never change its spots. Actually it just did, with radical - if typically unannounced - economic reforms. A 400-fold hike in the price of rice: now that is serious, and far riskier than a cup of coffee in Brunei. Starting down the road of economic change unleashes effects that make retreat all but impossible - unlike politics, where a toe in the water can easily be withdrawn again.

Seemingly separate, such internal changes give hope that this time North Korea is less waiting for Godot (who never shows) than Peter and the wolf (which did, eventually). Maybe, just maybe, the next round of talks between North Korea et. al. will be for real. Perhaps this time Pyongyang won't stomp off the field, skulk in its lair, then reemerge to cheers from a strangely amnesiac audience. That's Groundhog Day, over and over.

No one expects Kim Jong-il to embrace peace and love overnight. It's bound to be a slow hard road. There will be setbacks. But we do need to know that it, and he, are for real. For

anyone alert, telling true progress from fake is not that hard. We have China and Vietnam as exemplars of what genuine change under communism looks like. As for how the two Koreas could do serious business, just look at the PRC and Taiwan - who also show that trade and investing don't guarantee peace, but that's another story.

We'll know North Korea really means it, if and when its outreach to the rest of us is sustained, substantial, and above all cumulative. It's way past coffee or cocktail time. That trans-DMZ railroad has to really happen. Those kidnap victims have to be freed. Pyongyang's ghastly arsenal of every nasty under the sun has to be - not surrendered (let's be realistic), but made subject to the kind of treaty and inspection arrangements now normal elsewhere. North Korea did a nuclear deal (if not a great one), but moved too slow on missiles before Clinton left office. Soon Kim Dae-jung, now a lame duck thanks to Pyongyang's rude and stupid lack of reciprocity, will step down too. Under Bush and post-Sept. 11, posturing and prevarication don't cut it any more. Never mind Paek: It's Kim Jong-il who needs to wake up and smell the coffee. Now. Fast.

Aidan Foster-Carter is honorary senior research fellow in sociology and modern Korea at Leeds University, U.K.